

# NATO beyond 75

## A Reinvigorated Alliance

Julia Martinet

Editor-in-Chief, Bled Strategic Times



This year the North Atlantic Treaty Organization celebrates a milestone anniversary – 75 years since its founding. And

at this respectable age, NATO is in its prime. The organization has evolved with the times and has been reinvigorated by the recent geopolitical security developments caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Today, NATO is in a state of transition. And, as its members declared a few weeks ago at the July Summit in Washington, NATO is willing to rise to the challenges, to stand up in order to uphold its values and the rules-based world order.

### A cornerstone of the post WWII international order

NATO's success "is measured not in battles won, but rather in lives saved, freedoms preserved and wars prevented"

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright

During its last summit in July 2024, NATO celebrated its 75th anniversary in Washington DC, the same place where its founding treaty was signed. Established in 1949 with 12 Member States, the organisation grew over the years in 10 rounds of enlargement to its current composition with 32 members, North Macedonia, Finland and Sweden having joined most recently.

Protecting more than 1 billion people, NATO is a political and military alliance with a collective defence and security system. Relying on combined military strength and its related deterrent effect emanating from this, the organisation has only seen its Article 5 obligation to defend one another invoked once in its 75 year existence, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

Over the past decades NATO provided peace, security and stability to its Member States at a level hitherto unseen in history. It provided a framework in which its societies could focus on working together, and on building their economies, which prospered significantly. From 1953 to 1963, the gross national product of NATO countries increased by 75%. By way of example, just before Slovenia's accession to NATO and the EU, it witnessed an increase in foreign investment by a steep 148.7%, with similar or even higher figures recorded for the other members in the 2004 enlargement.

In addition to setting the stage for economic growth and prosperity for its members, the cooperation between

NATO members has expanded over the years beyond security, to include the advancement of science and technology, the provision of medical supplies and humanitarian relief, also to non-NATO countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Moldova, Tunisia and Ukraine.

### Evolving role in changing times

"The Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace."

NATO 2022 Strategic Concept

The world has changed significantly since the aftermath of the WWII, and with it has the organisation. **One of NATO's strengths**, allowing it to survive over the years, **is its capacity to adapt and change in response to new crises or major events.**

Four key phases can be distinguished throughout NATO's history. The *first* important phase was the Cold War years (1949-1989), the original context for which the organisation was founded. During this time, inter alia the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis took place, leading NATO to adopt its MC14/3 Strategic Concept and the Harmel Report, **introducing the notion of deterrence** and détente and **laying the foundation of cooperative security** which NATO pursued as an approach in later decades.

The post-cold war years (1989-2001) represented NATO's *second phase*. With the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO redefined its purpose and tasks and **focused predominantly on dialogue, cooperation, peace keeping and crisis management.** It reached out to Russia and other post-Soviet states by establishing in 1994 the Partnership for Peace Programme which provided a basis for cooperative relations, albeit without directly granting any perspective of membership.

The attacks of 9/11 marked the beginning of the *third phase*. Whilst NATO pursued further its peace keeping and crisis management activities, new security risks and non-state actors came to the fore, requiring an **additional focus on counter-terrorism and the need to engage and cooperate** with partner countries and other international actors. During this time, NATO set up ISAF, a multinational military coalition which had its troops deployed for the first time outside Europe and North America, and which was supported by both NATO and partner nations.

Russia's invasion in Ukraine, first by illegally occupying Crimea in 2014, and thereafter by launching a full-scale invasion in February 2024, triggered NATO's *fourth and ongoing phase*. Russia's attack has led to a **reinvigoration of the organisation** and full realisation by its members and their societies of NATO's

raison d'être. The current war was at the very basis of NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, in which it identified Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic Area". The war caused a **greater emphasis on Deterrence and Defence**, led to the biggest increase of defence expenditure amongst the European allies and Canada in decades, a reinforced commitment to NATO's institutions and initiatives, and an enlargement with two hitherto neutral countries directly bordering Russia.

In each of these four phases, NATO was faced with different types of threats and risks, challenging the organisation each time to adapt and address the situation in the most appropriate manner. Whilst the organisation did so, the changes made were typically gradual, their implementation relatively slow in pace but founded in consensus amongst its Member States.

The often-quoted **reasons for NATO's lasting endurance and appeal** are first and foremost the strong political will and public support amongst its members. **At its core, its members are democratic states with a common value set and commitment to uphold liberal values and the rules-based world order.** NATO's functioning is based on consensus and diplomacy and allows ample margin for compromise. Smaller Member States highly value the access to the collective defence and combined military capability of the organisation, and the sharing of information and common training, which allows them to ensure effective and adequate security and defence for their citizens with a commitment to fair burden sharing.

### Challenges and opportunities

"Ukraine's future is in NATO."

NATO 2024 Washington Summit Declaration

Whilst NATO has been recurrently declared, by the press or by others, as being in some degree of existential crisis, brain dead or at the brink of obsolescence, **NATO is as necessary today as it was at its foundation.**

The traditional definitions of armed conflict no longer apply per se today, with hybrid- or cyber attacks and other threats taking place in war and peace time alike. **The armed conflicts worldwide being increasingly interlinked, the ensuing instability and risks for the global security pose new and significant challenges with high geopolitical impact.**

NATO defined the **key challenges and threats to the peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic** in its 2024 Washington Summit Declaration as follows:

"Russia remains the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security. Terrorism, in all its forms and manifes-

tations, is the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of our citizens and to international peace and prosperity. The threats we face are global and interconnected.

Strategic competition, pervasive instability, and recurrent shocks define our broader security environment. Conflict, fragility and instability in Africa and the Middle East directly affect our security and the security of our partners. Where present, these trends, amongst others, contribute to forced displacement, fuelling human trafficking and irregular migration. Iran's destabilising actions are affecting Euro-Atlantic security. The People's Republic of China (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies continue to challenge our interests, security and values. The deepening strategic partnership between Russia and the PRC and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut and reshape the rules-based international order, are a cause for profound concern. We are confronted by hybrid, cyber, space, and other threats and malicious activities from state and non-state actors."

NATO's reference to "strategic competition" and "pervasive instability" illustrates the **global character of the current security challenges.** The strategic partnership between Russia and the PRC is explicitly considered a "cause for profound concern", whilst it also condemns the problematic role of Belarus and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in enabling or fuelling Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

**It remains to be seen how and to which extent NATO will position itself in the coming years** in the light of the growing alignment of Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. For now, the **NATO members committed to strengthen the deterrence and defence posture and to accelerate the modernisation of its collective defence** by a wide array of measures. With respect to **Ukraine**, NATO expressed its support for the latter on "its irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership". In order to help Ukraine defend itself, a number of security and support measures were agreed upon, including the establishment of a NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine, a NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre in Poland, and a pledge of long-term security assistance to Ukraine with a minimum baseline of 40 billion Euro within the next year.

Similar to the previous phases it went through, NATO will need to undergo the necessary changes once more to successfully meet the various and significant challenges its Member States are facing today. NATO's July 2024 declaration, on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, shows that **its members have all the intent to rise to the occasion.** ■